

Why Data Governance projects fail and what to do instead (Part 1)

Do Data Governance projects fail?

Whilst the numbers vary depending on your source, the consensus is that more than half of all Data Governance initiatives aren't successful. Successful in this context means that they deliver more value than their cost, AND that they are sustained and continuing over the medium to long term. A very recent Teradata-sponsored study found 90% of Australian organisations think that Data Governance initiatives should have more priority than they currently do.

Data Governance initiatives are hard. Getting and sustaining management attention in activities that aren't easily connected to increasing revenue or reducing cost is difficult, and any initiative that requires involvement from across the enterprise is politically tricky. If you're struggling to get your Data Governance initiatives to the success levels you expect, you are not alone. Outside of the heavily regulated Finance industry (and even sometimes there too!), there are very few good examples of wildly successful Data Governance programs.

Common causes of Data Governance failure

To misquote Tolstoy's famous opening line to Anna Karenina, "Happy Data Governance programs are all alike; every unhappy Data Governance program is unhappy in its own way". Whilst it is true that there are many different reasons for Data Governance projects to under-achieve, most of the causes can be grouped into 6 general reasons for failure. Understanding these causes is a useful place to start when trying to deliver a good Data Governance program. They are:

- **Lack of Corporate Relevance:** If the Data Governance team have fixated on solving problems that are low priority or even irrelevant to the main processes of the organisation, and to the management team that drives the organisation, the initiative will not survive.
- **Too much policy, not enough action:** When the Data Governance program spends more time writing roles and responsibilities documents rather than actually fixing the data, its a recipe for an under-performing program. The policies, roles and structure of a Data Governance program should (at least until initial success has been achieved) be only just the bare minimum required to support and sustain an action-oriented program of work.
- **IT-Driven:** Data Governance projects require detailed understanding of the meaning and content of data items, and the authority to make changes to business processes to improve the data. IT-Driven initiatives have neither the knowledge nor the authority to be successful.

IT-driven initiatives can achieve success in some areas (data catalogues and reference data management to name a few) but cannot deliver all the requirements for a Data Governance program.

- **Boil the ocean:** When Data Governance teams try to solve all the problems or a very large pool of problems in one go, delivery timelines blow out so much that frequently the initiatives are stopped before they can deliver any outcome. Boris Evelson, from Forrester Research, said in 2020 that "No large, global, heterogenous multi-business and product company can ever hope to clean up all its data. It's always a continuous journey." I think this applies to most Australian organisations in the medium to large scale as well.
- **No success measures:** Some Data Governance programs actually are successful but are not recognised as being successful as they can't communicate their story to others in a way that engages the audience. To be successful, the rest of the organisation must see and understand the benefits delivered. This can only be done by having convincing improvement/uplift metrics and a clear and understandable message that non-specialists can consume.
- **Bucket vs Stream Thinking:** If the Data Governance team focusses on improving the data in one static area (such as an analytic or reporting system) without addressing the continuing arrival of poor-quality data from operational systems, it is unlikely to be successful.

With these six common causes of lack of Data Governance success understood, my next post will be on Fujitsu Data & AI's ResultsNow® approach to effective Data Governance.

Have you seen other common causes of Data Governance programs that underachieved against their expectations?

In the meantime, if you need help ensuring your Data Governance projects don't fail, please contact a Fujitsu Data & AI specialist now.

Contact

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